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SMASHING THE AUDIENCE

The Political Economy of New Zealand Television

A thesis submitted to
the Department of Sociology
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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a work in the political economy of New Zealand television. It seeks to understand the relationship between three distinct processes. Firstly, how are the institutions of broadcasting effected by their location within the centralised, extensively intervening New Zealand State? Secondly, how does the above relationship of the institution to the State effect the work of professional television journalists in the production of political television? Thirdly, how do the two levels of relationship previously considered effect effect the programmes that are produced? Each question is answered through three types of analysis: historical, qualitative observation and semiotic respectively. It is argued that the entire process is unified within the terms of the liberal democratic State, and that the practices of journalists ideologically represent this State form as "above" the class character of the New Zealand social formation.

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INTRODUCTION

"For every complex problem there is a solution that is
simple, neat, and wrong"

- H. Mencken

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a work in the political economy of New Zealand television. It seeks to understand the ways in which people make television, and the reasons why they make it in one way and not another. Television is a matter of pictures and sounds that can be understood by viewers. In this respect, this thesis is a political economy of meaning. The making of programmes can be understood as a very complex process. At one level it involves the relationships between various institutions. In New Zealand this has to do with the Broadcasting Corporation, Parliament, political parties, and so on. One must consider how these institutions relate to each other and to society generally. There is also a second level to look at. Television is produced for the viewer by a certain social group, professional journalists. To understand how and why television is made is for this reason a matter of studying this group in its place of work. Finally, television "finishes up" as programmes that are broadcast across the country. Studying the meaning of these programmes is therefore another important part of an analysis of television production. Research could concentrate on any one of these levels and ignore the other two, but by doing this it would not be adequate to the complexity of the entire process. This thesis analyses each level in turn and shows how they are interconnected.

All thesis work is immediately faced by the disarray of modern social theory. Giddens discusses the disarray of orthodox

sociology in his useful essay, "The Prospects for Social Theory Today", (1979, pp234-259). He attributes the present muddle to the failure to sufficiently distinguish between the social and natural sciences. Thus, for example, orthodox sociology has been heavily dependent on positivist methodologies. It has continued with the by-now ancient theory of language as the "description of reality." This has created an inability to cope with the problem of meaning. Language as the complex of human practices that create meaning is ignored in favour of simple, quantitative categorisations.

In chapter one, thesis work on television in New Zealand is assessed in the light of such criticisms as those made by Giddens. A strong tendency to empiricism is identified, and related to the establishment of an orthodox, pluralist sociology in this country. The overriding tendency is to treat television as a "tube", as something which functions only to transport "messages" formed elsewhere. One of the main problems with this sort of analysis is that it fails to gain a critical distance from the liberal democratic ideologies which television itself proposes. In chapter two a way out of this impasse is associated with the recent emergence of "Cultural Studies" in Australia and New Zealand. This emergence is briefly charted.

Giddens (ibid, pp2-4) claims that the social sciences have failed to produce an adequate theory of social action. This is due to their inability to overcome the opposition between voluntarism and determinism. Human activity is explained either as the pure intentionality of the free subject or as the completely determined

social reflex. The pressing need for contemporary social theory is to adequately link together agency and structure. Giddens argues that this need can be met by attempting to adequately theorise the various social forms of language. The social practices and practical consciousness of meaning mediate between and break down the dualism that has stalled social theory. This proposition is taken up in chapter three. Television is a body of practices that produce sense. Two dominant modes of analysing the production of meaning are identified. Firstly, there is the culturalist approach, which emphasises agency and experience. Secondly, there is the structuralist approach, which emphasises determination and ideology. In this chapter the outline of an adequate analysis of television is presented. This outline structures the remainder of the thesis.

An adequate analysis of television must attempt to resolve the opposition between culturalist and structuralist modes of analysis. Chapter three argues that this resolution must take place within a Cultural Studies reworking of the Marxist theory of the State, and of the theory of relative autonomy in particular. This reworking is adequate to both the specificity of and determinate connections between the various human practices that compose the social formation as a whole. This promises an analysis that can grasp both what is peculiar to television's creation of meaning and how this is related to other aspects of New Zealand society.

From this point on, the thesis breaks down into three parts, each dealing with a relatively autonomous level in the making of

television. These parts are respectively (a) political economy, (b) the cultural practices of current affairs journalists, and (c) two programmes produced for the 1981 general election, "Facing the Nation" and "The Leaders Debate". While none of these levels can be reduced to any of the others, nor can they be analysed completely separately. Each part divides into two chapters. The first chapter is primarily concerned with the theoretical task of establishing the relative autonomy of the level with which it deals, the second with the work of concrete analysis.

Part two deals with the political and economic relationships between classes, the State and the institutions of broadcasting in New Zealand history. Essentially this is a matter of the Marxist relative autonomy theory of the state, as represented by the recent work of Poulantzas and Wright. First, one must consider the relationship between the State and the Economy (Fig.1) -

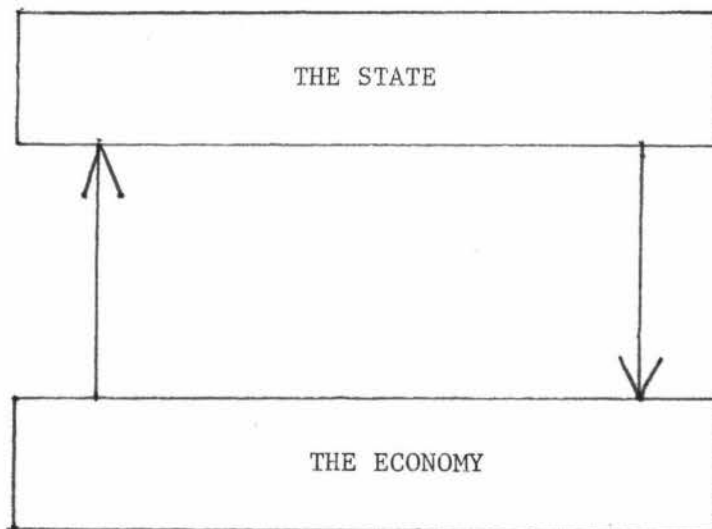


Fig. 1 - THE RELATIVELY AUTONOMOUS STATE

The State is relatively autonomous from the classes constituted by the capitalist mode of production. It thus provides the site for the (albeit contested) reproduction of the means and relations of production. In particular, the New Zealand State developed an interventionist, centralised form which stabilised an economy based upon small rural and urban property. New Zealand broadcasting is contained within this State form (Fig. 2) -

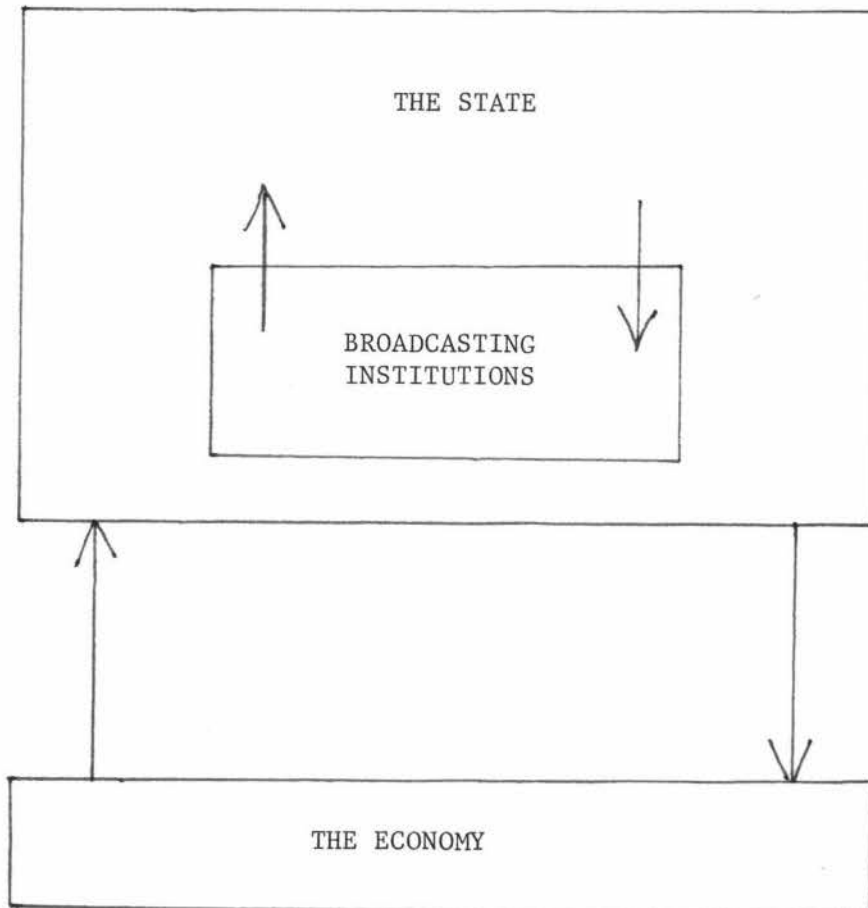


Fig. 2 - THE RELATIVELY AUTONOMOUS INSTITUTIONS OF BROADCASTING

Broadcasting institutions are incorporated within the structural determination of the State in general. They are "State apparatuses". Nevertheless, historically they have become increasingly autonomous from specific classes and political

parties, particularly from the government of the day. This raises the necessity of closely studying the practices of professional journalists, to ascertain how their active creation of meanings is determined by the structured relations considered thus far.

This problem is taken up in part three. Broadcasting institutions are themselves complex phenomena. Three important dimensions are considered - (1) the bureaucratic mode of organisation, (2) the various class relations within the institution, and (3) the journalists' everyday practices used for making programmes. As our concern is with the production of meaning, the latter is the main focus of analysis (Fig. 3) -

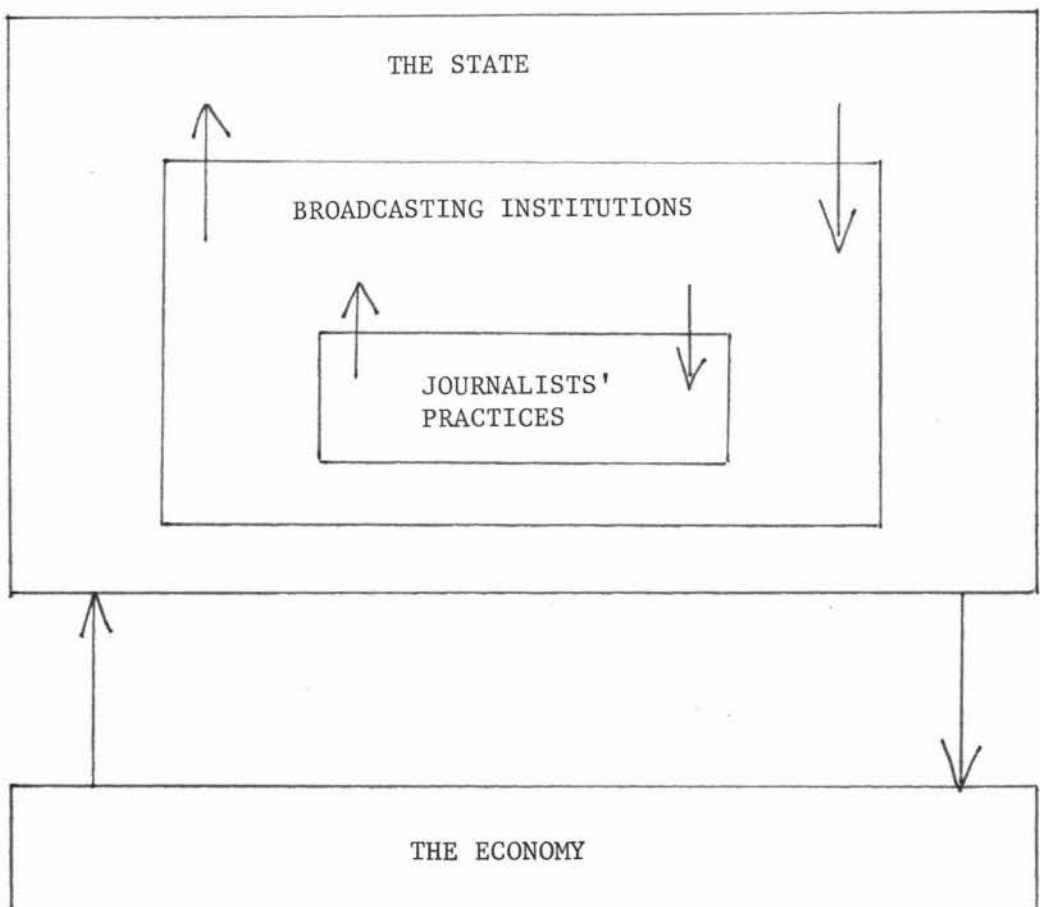


Fig. 3 - THE RELATIVELY AUTONOMOUS PRACTICES OF JOURNALISTS

The everyday practices and common-sense knowledge of journalists is analysed through a detailed, qualitative case study of the production of two programmes ("Facing the Nation" and "The Leaders Debate") within the B.C.N.Z., as part of its "coverage" of the 1981 general election. Broadcasters have considerable editorial autonomy; they are rarely told what to do by someone else. It is argued that there are principally two interconnected practices operated by broadcasters to make meaningful political programmes. These are balance and impartiality. Through these practices broadcasters represent themselves as politically neutral, as treating all comers equally. In fact, television is partisanly committed to, and attempts to ideologically reproduce, a particular form of political organisation and actively represses alternative modes. The practices of journalists limit the meaning of politics to the structured clash between the mass parties of Parliament. The individual viewers, and voters, are placed as outside politics, rather than as the holders of specific and conflicting interests. Political activity for the viewer is reduced to passive, individual preference (e.g. voting), rather than active participation and collective organisation. Thus although the practices of broadcasters are autonomous, they are only relatively so. Ultimately they work within the present, liberal democratic form of the State. By concealing class interests, these practices reproduce the dominant political "resolution" and organisation of class conflict. This accomplishes an ideological stabilisation of New Zealand society as capitalist.

Televised politics is first seen by the viewer as "text", as completed programmes watched usually in the viewer's own home. While it is true that the practices of journalists create these texts, other forces are also at work. Thus, for example, there are the participating political parties. Those forms of political organisation excluded from the programme may also have an impact. Furthermore, different viewers may interpret the same programme differently. That is to say, the text contains a number of possible "readings". For these reasons the text has a relative autonomy of its own (Fig. 4) -

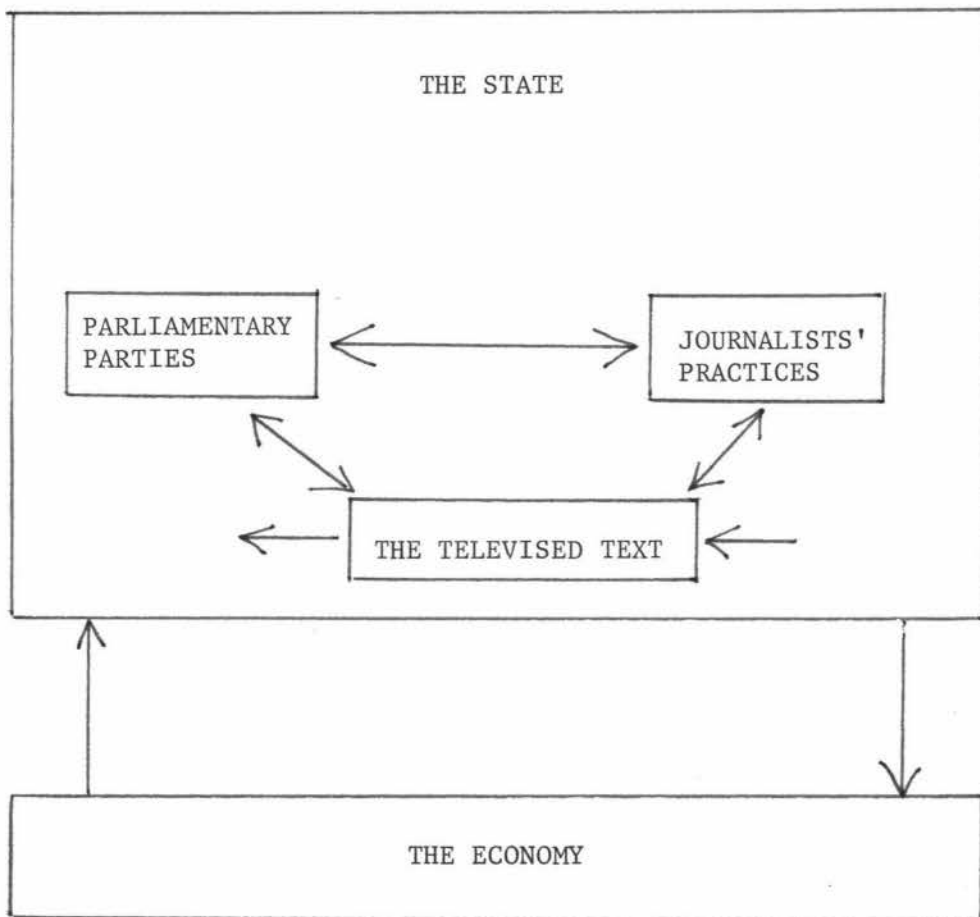


Fig. 4 - THE RELATIVELY AUTONOMOUS TEXT

In part four the two programmes, "Facing the Nation" and "The

Leaders Debate", are studied as texts. The method used is a semiotic one: it looks at the ways in which these programmes work as a kind of language, as a rule-bound system that creates a certain type of meaning and rules out other possible types. This analysis brings together all the forms of determination considered so far: the text is a "site" where they are worked out and presented for the viewer.

Journalists' practices exclude those forms of organisation outside the liberal democratic model. In the text, this exclusion appears as the absence of any organised groups other than political parties. It is argued that in this way the text creates a certain position from which it is supposed to be viewed: it creates a certain form of subjectivity. This subjectivity is not organised, active collectivities but a mass of passive individuals who only watch while others act. The audience is "smashed" into its smallest pieces, isolated individuals, by this repressing of any forms of organisation. All political parties accept this work of broadcasters. Thus in the text, party representatives and journalists are complementary in terms of the social structure as a whole, even though individually a politician may argue quite violently with an interviewer. Individual politicians argue with each other over the "smashed" audience. Each tries to "pick up more pieces" than his opponent. In this way the conflict that takes place in the text reproduces the liberal democratic, parliamentary form of the State. Individuals vote for the party they like the most. The party that is coincidentally preferred by the majority gains parliamentary power. This ideologically

conceals the basic conflict of interests in a class society.

To conclude, this thesis is a sustained and concrete demonstration of the relative autonomy of television. It shows television's distinctive role within the political economy of New Zealand society. Three separate levels are studied - institutions, cultural practices and texts. Each level is different from the others, but ultimately they are all unified within the State. Television can be named an "ideological state apparatus" because it tends to universalise this parliamentary form of the State. It argues that no other form of political organisation is possible. Thus it claims that the State's stabilisation of New Zealand society as capitalist is in the interests of every member of society, rather than in the interests of just some.

Having introduced the thesis in general terms, work can now begin. Chapter one criticises the theses that have been done on political television in New Zealand. Overcoming the inadequacies of these pieces of research is the project of this thesis.